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Women's Co-operative Guild.

WOMEN ON EDUCATIONAL COMMITTEES.

A Few Reasons why Women should sit on Educational Committees of Co-operative Societies.

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WOMEN ON EDUCATIONAL COMMITTEES.

IN reviewing the position of women before the Education Act of 1870 with that of the present time, we cannot help being struck with the great difference which it made in their development. Previously it was considered quite sufficient for all domestic and marriageable purposes if women had obtained a rudimentary knowledge of reading, writing, and arithmetic, whilst the more thoughtful parents made strenuous efforts to give those of the opposite sex a good education. But since the Act came into force, and girls obtained the same chances of education as their previously more fortunate brothers, they have shown their ability to take in and appreciate these advantages, and gradually, as our women have become more educated, women's organisations have sprung up all over the country. All shades of politics, religious bodies, and temperance workers have their women's organisations; in fact, one of the most notable features of English life is the ever-widening degree of interest that women are taking in all things pertaining to public life, and the determination of the sex to let nothing stop their progress or limit their usefulness.

No organisation has made such progress as our own Women's Guild in connection with the co-operative movement. Taking the time when the guild was started, in 1883, up to the present time, it is somewhat amazing in its results; at the commencement, two or three women who were anxious for the advancement of the women in the co-operative movement, and mark, then, how it has gone on increasing, until we have a network all over the country numbering 12,500 strong.

The founders of the guild were desirous of spreading the knowledge of the principles of co-operation amongst women co-opera-

tors, and of providing suitable recreation for the members and to further educate by bringing fresh interest in their lives, and great has been the success. It is, in fact, impossible to state in words the amount of good done by our Women's Guild in different ways, and so education amongst our guild women has spread, and they are being taught their duties not only as co-operators, but also as citizens. In having lectures on Poor-Law administration, it has been the means of some women serving as lady guardians, and is it not an established fact that the lives of women and children are being benefited by the change?

The women of the co-operative movement are becoming more alive, too, to the usefulness of women on the educational and directorate boards, and there are good reasons why they should serve on these committees. I believe, in the report of 1893, that in 570 societies making returns there were above 107,000 women members in their own right—in Plymouth above 9,000, in Bolton 8,000, in Derby 4,000, in Woolwich 4,000, in Lancaster 2,000, and in Eccles above 3,000; and in all these societies, except Bolton, the women, from various causes, outnumber the men. It stands to reason, then, that the societies must be strengthened by the women being members of the stores, for the power of women to advance or promote trade should be a good and sufficient reason that co-operators should seek to secure their active participation in the working of the movement.

Then, again—although I hate the term "women's rights" as it is sometimes applied—if the women members do their best to influence the co-operative trade of the country, then the funds for educational and propagandist work are upheld by the funds which the women have helped to make. Have the women, then, not a "right" to be represented on these committees, to look at these things with a woman's eye, and from a woman's standpoint, for who should know a woman's needs better than a woman?

It was at a conference held at our branch last year that I was asked if I would stand for the educational committee. Having heard no word of it before, my reply was, "No, thank you," very

promptly. "But," said one of the two members who had interviewed me, "why not? You know you are in favour of women serving on educational committees, so why not set the example?" During the conference I was busily engaged in thinking about the subject, for and against. At the close of the meeting, the two members referred to came up and said, "Well, have you decided?" I replied, "Yes, I will try, although I do not think it at all likely that I shall be elected." Our members did not give me much time to retract my word, but set the matter in working order at once. Without going into details, which are practically the same in every election, I may just mention, in passing, that the guild took the matter up, and worked as heartily as if working for themselves, with the result that I was elected on the educational committee with a good majority.

It has struck me very forcibly how very sensitive to the honour of co-operation the members become when a woman first consents to stand for these various committees. It not only applies to my own experience, but to others which I have come across. When the news goes forth that a woman is intending to stand for election, then the commotion arises, and questions such as "Who is she?" "Where does she come from?" and remarks such as "Women are best at home," and "She had better be mending her stockings," seem to be the order of the day. Hitherto, when we have been asked to vote for men, either on the board of directors or educational committee, we have not inquired whether he be tinker, tailor, rich man, or poor man; but we have inquired if he be a man worthy of the trust to be given to him, and if he be capable of the work which will be expected of him. Why should not the same inquiries suffice in the case of a woman? for I think we may safely trust the guilds, in their present state of efficiency, not to nominate any woman who is not fitted, either by education or sound common-sense, to do the work.

I will honestly confess that it was with mixed feelings that I viewed the prospect of being the only woman on the educational committee, but the courtesy and consideration of the gentlemen

who were on soon set me at my ease, and the great interest I have in the work soon made me feel at home amongst them; for, after all, it is only extending the area, for as the guilds are more particularly for educational and social life of women, so educational committee work is for the educational and social life of co-operators generally.

The election of women on educational committees must cause a greater feeling of sympathy and bond of union between the educational committee and the Women's Guild, as each are beginning to realise more that they are working for the same good cause with, not antagonistic to the other. For instance, last season our directors, educational committee, and the Women's Guild appointed a number from each to form a propagandist committee, to have tea and evening meetings in connection with each branch store. Two of the guild members spoke at some of these meetings, and the other worked well in her way. But it did not end there. The guild members who were members of the particular branches worked the better for their tea parties, knowing they were represented on the committee.

On the visit of our choir to the Festival at the Crystal Palace, last August, several mothers of the younger female members expressed themselves as more satisfied with the arrangements when they knew that a lady member of the committee was present with them. And a pleasing event took place a few weeks ago, when our educational committee, who had only once sent a delegate to Congress before, appointed me as their delegate, and to represent our women's guild, thus showing in a kindly fashion that they were appreciating the work we were trying to do.

I feel confident that if more joint work was done, better results could be attained, for all who have taken part in this work know that when arrangements are made by one party without the knowledge of the other, one or other must suffer in consequence. The secretaries of guilds are too often placed in a dilemma by having to find subjects of interest week by week, whereas by joint action much better lectures could be obtained. One society (Kingston-upon-

Hull) has a joint committee in operation with good results. The result of making men and women equally interested in the highest things of life, equally anxious that progress should be made, and entering more fully into a common life, is to make a better and happier people.

When we bring to mind all that women have done in our time, and see them branching out in different directions, we are obliged to believe that the days of exclusiveness are fast passing away. In conclusion, let me say, whether we women work for the spread of the principles of co-operation as private or guild members or members of other committees, we should all remember we are working for one great aim; for, as a writer in the "Co-operative News," says: "Anything which tends to perfect and develop our character as a social being, anything which gives us a clear conception of social duty, and stimulates us to realise that conception, may be called really and truly co-operative. Our responsibilities are greater than those of any other bodies of social reformers, because our principles are wider, our aims are higher, our work more far-reaching in its scope and in its effect. Hence we must be prepared to meet our responsibilities in a larger and more generous spirit, taking care that the good which we temporarily set before us be not regarded as final. Education will help us to see that we are not to be content with mere shop-keeping; but these things are only as instruments for the subduing of the material world to our purposes, and for the enjoyment in common of a higher, wider, and richer life."

"The woman's cause is man's; they rise or sink
Together, dwarfed or godlike, bond or free.
If she be small, slight-natured, miserable,
How shall men grow?
And in the long years they must grow
Till, at the last, she sets herself to man
Like perfect music into noble words."

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